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ABSTRACT

To help maintain class interest in the important themes addressed in "Walden" and "The Duties of Civil Disobedience," a high school English teacher has presented a dramatic monologue as Henry David Thoreau to his students. After much library research, the teacher used some of the props characteristic of the author, such as a walking stick and a flute, which he played accompanied by a recording of marsh sounds. He typed up lyrics of contemporary songs and introduced the composers as "modern" poets who held Thoreau's beliefs. His first presentation as Thoreau left such an impression on students that they wrote about and discussed it for years afterward. The presentation also had a profound effect on staff members and students' parents as well. The instructor began giving the presentation for other schools, colleges, and community groups in ten different states and in England, as well as for the Thoreau Society during its annual meeting on the anniversary of the author's birth, and each summer at Walden Pond State Reservation in Massachusetts. He has also given presentations as other authors and characters, although none approaches the popularity of Thoreau. Teachers interested in presenting similar "living history" should consider several recommendations: (1) notice any natural talents that can be incorporated into the presentation, (2) be sincerely interested in the character and believe that young people can benefit from his or her wisdom, and (3) research carefully the requisite background, behavior, philosophy, dress, and speech. (HTH)

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Teacher As Actor - Henry David Thoreau -
From Room One-Eleven To Walden Pond and Beyond

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Teacher As Actor--Henry David Thoreau From
Room One-Eleven To Walden Pond and Beyond

If a colleague had told me in 1983 that I would soon be impersonating Henry David Thoreau on two continents and, particularly, each summer for hundreds of visitors at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, I would have laughed in his face and called him mad. But this and much more has happened. And it all began eleven years ago in my high school English classroom.

In 1975 I was a very insecure high school teacher in my third year for my Alma Mater, the Pennsbury School District, in southeastern Pennsylvania. For two years I had been absolutely frustrated with sophomore students who were bored to death with the required readings by Henry David Thoreau, and I had stopped the study early each year, but not before trying everything I could think of to get the students interested. My frustration was compounded because I saw four themes in Walden and "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" that the young people in our society need to hear and discuss often: living a simple life in the midst of a complicated, sometimes desperate, and always materialistic, world; following one's own dreams and avoiding the molds that others might want someone to fit; establishing a relationship with nature out of which comes an honest respect and care for her; and, getting in touch with, and standing up for, what one believes, of finding self worth in the process, and a courage to dare to be different.

One spring day of that year I was sitting alone after school in my classroom, about to give up teaching excerpts from Walden for the third year in a row, when I jokingly thought, 'Don't feel too badly. The only

way these kids would have understood Thoreau is if the guy had risen from the dead and confronted them dramatically with the issues himself." As I pondered this, the word "dramatically" stuck in my mind and I began visualizing what the man would have had to go through to keep my students' attention, and something I imagined next made me sit up and take notice. Perhaps having Thoreau rise from the dead wasn't as preposterous as it seemed if I was willing to take a big chance. Was it possible that I could pull such a thing off? One must understand that when I say I was a very insecure teacher I'm speaking of someone who had to have all of his carefully prepared notes spread out on his desk before he had the confidence to teach. But, we're also speaking about someone who has always believed that one hundred percent of teaching is loving young people, and another fifty percent is loving the subject one teaches. It was because of the love for the students, wanting them so much to get some worth and challenge and insight for their lives from Thoreau, that I was able to short circuit the insecurity, at least for a few crucial hours. I decided that it was possible for Thoreau to rise from the dead, if I had the courage to impersonate him. It was ironic that in my quiet desperation it was a bit of Thoreauvian philosophy that could encourage me-- the example to not be afraid to be different.

I became consumed by the concept of walking into the classroom the next day and announcing that I was Henry David Thoreau.

That very afternoon I checked out some books about the man from our school library. On the way home, I stopped by the Delaware River and searched the flood refuse for a perfect walking stick. I found one just the right size and shape; but, as I walked along gripping

the branch, trying it out, pretending I was walking into the classroom, a wave of fear swept through me. I realized how serious I was about this idea. I was really going to go through with it. What was I thinking? Except for the concept being done by actors in movies, I had never seen anyone impersonating a famous person, and especially not in front of the world's most difficult audience, a class filled with fifteen and sixteen year olds who had better things to do.

That night I madly searched through the library books for clues as to what this man Thoreau was like. I discovered soon how little I really knew of him. I wrote down notes as to how I should act. I began to think as if I were Thoreau. I typed out sheets for the students with quotes from the areas most important to "my" philosophy.

I found that Thoreau had often enjoyed playing his flute at Walden Pond, so I dusted off the cobwebs from my own flute and got out a record with natural sounds of the marsh at dawn. I planned a moment when I would play my flute with the environmental effects in the background.

Thinking as Thoreau, it occurred to me that contemporary song writers were still speaking the same messages as this famous nineteenth century author. Examples began to flood my mind. I typed up the lyrics to several of the more popular songs, chief among them being "I've Got A Name," by Jim Croce, and decided that next day I would introduce them as modern poets who held "my" own beliefs. Could I actually bridge the time and cultural gap?

I was excited about these ideas, but that question of whether I really would be ready kept haunting me. I was picturing myself as Thoreau, as successfully carrying out my plans; but, realistically,

wouldn't the kids be more likely laughing at me then, and for the rest of the school year? "Barto? Yeah, what a joke! The guy's really gone! Came to class yesterday and thought he was Thoreau. A real screwball. But we did get to waste some time."

Next day the moment came all too quickly. The class I decided to try my dramatic experiment with was in the last moments of lunch at the cafeteria as I began dressing nervously in the book room, located in the front of my class. That morning I had covered its large window with construction paper and some innocent looking calendar pictures so that no one would see me back there.

I slipped into woolen socks, hiking boots, jeans and flannel shirt. I took a deep breath as the first bell rang and hurriedly placed my flute, environmental record, a copy of Walden, and the various ditto copies I had prepared, into a knapsack freshly labeled "H.D.T." in magic marker on the outside flap. I closed my eyes and said a sincere prayer as I heard the voices coming down the hallway.

There was the final bell and the last-second snuffling and sliding of students into desks, the loud conversations of young people rushing in the latest before the teacher strode in and demanded attention. Little did they know. Some students wondered out loud where Barto was. The record player was sitting on the desk. On the board was written, "Author, Lecturer, Naturalist--Henry David Thoreau--Be Kind To Our Guest." A few students wondered what the "Guest" part meant. "Who cares?" someone offered. "It's probably as boring as the rest of this Thoreau stuff."

My heart was pounding madly as I threw the knapsack over my shoulder, grabbed my walking stick, and stood with one sweaty hand on the bookroom doorknob. I turned to look at my regular clothes lying in a pile by the sink, thinking that I still had opportunity to change under cover of the class noise. But, as I turned, I unintentionally jiggled the

doorknob. One of the girls in the front of the room yelled, "On, my God! I think Barto's in the book room!" A fearful hush and, despite that strong urge to change back quickly into my street clothes before anyone knew the difference, and to conduct business as usual, Henry David Thoreau strode into the classroom.

There was laughter. There were giggles. There were the usual creative comments. And then...the magic moment many teachers dream about. A class unfolded that students wrote to me about and mentioned whenever they saw me for years to come. Thoreau not only got through the barriers, he touched young lives and made them want to know more about him. He left behind a new attitude toward, and respect for, himself and his work. I had to hold back the tears and shouts of elation as I closed the book room door, as the bell rang, and as I heard the comments--honest comments--of appreciative students. Some had even waited to tell me.

Henry Thoreau made his first entrance into the lives of my students that day, and it would not be his last. All of his visits would be appreciated over the years, some casually, and some much more.

That the visits could be much more than casual became apparent in 1980 when something unexpected happened in a sophomore honors English class. Henry's emotional appeal challenged the students' lives using the quotation, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." This was at the end of the visit and was so dramatic, surprising even me, that young people were in tears. Even after Thoreau had exited and the bell had sounded, there was not a sound in the room. Students had been so affected that they weren't sure what to do.

Among the other fond memories of the success of the visits, two

stand out. Once the school librarian came to me and asked what I had done in class that day, that one of her library aides, and a student of mine, had been visibly shaken. When the librarian approached her and asked her if everything was okay, she responded that Thoreau had visited Mr. Barto's English class and that she needed some time to think about some things in her life. A year after a visit, a parent approached me in the cafeteria and shared what a profound effect the Thoreau experience had had upon her daughter. In fact, the daughter had gone out and bought works by Thoreau to learn as much as she could. And the mother, surprised and wondering if she might be missing something, read the same books. I, as a teacher, could never receive a better compliment than what happened in these lives.

In August, 1983, I received a letter from a student who had been in attendance for one of the extra special visits. She wrote at the end of her letter, "P.S. Please give my best to Mr. Henry David Thoreau. I sure hope he continues to visit your classes! I'll never forget that, Mr. Barto." These words convinced me to do something I had been toying with for a short while. The visit had meant so much to my own students, why not share it with others?

I was about to begin a six month sabbatical leave. What better time to offer the Thoreau experience to others? I immediately drafted a two-page letter and sent it out to area districts by September.

Since then, during the last two years, I have said, "I am Henry David Thoreau" at colleges, high schools, elementary schools and community groups in ten states, for the Thoreau Society during its annual 1985 meeting on Henry's birthday, July 12, in Concord, Massachusetts. I have been Thoreau in England at the Lake District National Park Visitors'

Center, and in Philadelphia at the National Council of Teachers of English 1985 convention in November. And, most incredibly to me, I will be Thoreau for the third summer for visitors from around the world at Walden Pond State Reservation, Concord, Massachusetts, from July 4 through August 16, 1986. It has all been an impossible dream come true.

The first time I was Thoreau at Walden Pond was the most memorable. It was for the best possible audience--English teachers from across the country who were part of a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for secondary teachers meeting in Concord to study Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau under Dr. Walter Harding, world renowned scholar on Thoreau. I was part of that group. And there was this audience in a naturally beautiful, cozy, wooded, green grove overlooking the pond, with the morning sunlight streaming through the trees, a bird answering the flute at one point in the presentation. Just to have stood there speaking Henry's words gave such power to the passages such as I had never thought possible; for here, before us, was everything he had been writing about.

I have done other character visits in my classes, including Reverend Hooper of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Minister's Black Veil," and an American Indian from Conrad Richter's novel, A Light in the Forest, a minister from Howard Fast's April Morning, and a host of others, but none has ever approached the popularity of the Thoreau visit.

Finally, in encouraging others to give living literary ^{history a} try in the classroom, I offer the following recommendations as steps in preparation for the experience:

1. Choose a literary or biographical character you feel comfortable with. The fact that the character is of the opposite sex may not be important. The character may even be an animal, or inanimate object. The latter may have stories to tell with unique insight. Take, for example, becoming the dead dog in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men.

2. Notice any natural talents that you have which may be incorporated into your presentation and plan an appropriate way to include them. Knowing how to play the flute lead to a whole segment on explaining and demonstrating the use of the fife in the Revolutionary War as we studied April Morning in my classes. One can also research areas that would interest students. I use facts about animals, and bird calls, in my Thoreau visits, combined with actual Thoreauvian history of his involvement with natural history.

3. Make certain that you have a sincere interest in the character and honestly believe that young people can benefit from that character. Students can sense your sincerity even if you don't have much talent or are insecure. The latter two fit me when I began the experiment.

4. Students and audiences of all ages enjoy anecdotes. Research for the funniest or most moving or most traditional or most entertaining anecdotes and use them often in your visit.

5. Research background, behavior, philosophy, dress, speech. Decide if you will allow students questions of the character. This demands close study. It took me two years of concentrated study before I now feel comfortable allowing any question about me as Thoreau. Before that, I faked my way through. I felt guilty, but I had to sustain the fantasy.

6. Determine which things you want to include in the visit and plan creative ways to get them across. I call each of these things a "string." A single string might be a dramatic reading, another an anecdote

note, or when I used my flute with the environmental record. Plan a few strings, and then string them together for your visit. Planning these smaller segments adds security and variety to the experience. It is then built in, no matter what order you take them. Leave out strings in the future that don't work. Experiment with new strings. Start small and work up. You don't have to fill an entire class period. Student questions can be a very special dimension to any visit.

7. Don't be afraid to bring visual aids with you as the character. They can be much more effective in the first person with the famous individual pointing out his house and his brother and sister, and giving a view of the letter that she wrote.

And whatever you do, don't give up until you've tried. Because I was willing to take a chance, thousands more than my own students have had a wonderful experience. But, of course, if what you do never leaves your classroom, it can be wonderful enough. There are young people--your students--waiting for your visit. And they're worth the risk.